Pat/Shock/Chewing Gum

It was a shock, at the age of ten years, our Pat telling my ma that he was going to join the De La Salle Brothers. That he was going to their college in Castletown, County Laois, Ireland.

A recruitment Reverend Brother from that religious order had come to their school in Keady Town to entice young pupils to leave home. Join their ‘order’.

A teaching missionary was the way our mum described her intake of that time. Encouraging her young son away from home.

Going to a forsaken outpost in southern Ireland. So far away. To become a teacher.

Standing close by, hearing all that talk, with my big brother, my best friend. The one who always soothed me in my distress. I too was in shock.

Ma insisted the school ‘Head Brother’ should come to her. To talk this matter over. To dissuade her only son, then, to be enticed away.

Brother Canice, decisively, affirmed Pat’s desire to go away. “He is clever,” Canice announced, “failing his eleven plus only by a

small margin. He passed then the review in flying colours.”

“Sure,” he went on, “the La Salle college is a training school foremost for teachers. They have a choice too to become a ‘Brother’. Allow him to go there. If he doesn’t like it he can leave. He will be home at end of each term. Won’t be forced ever to remain.” And so it happened.

Remembering that day. The long journey to County Laois from County Armagh was tedious. Stopping briefly to have tea and juices from the picnic. Refuelling the old Hilman car. Father could stretch his legs. Our mother, who

now seemed to have a new sense of pride, was in good form.

Being ten years old, I missed him. Sending him the odd funny post card, we kept in touch. He never replied. But he did return for those ‘balmy’ sunny holidays when all schools were off. Telling us he loved getting those cards. Playing rounders and cricket in our backyard. Summing up all the neighbours kids to join in. He had a way with him. A great manner in how he pulled us all together.

There was that day too. The day he had saved his birthday monies to buy a guitar. Walking the whole seven miles to Armagh without

telling anyone. Returning exhausted but happy. The guitar was a plastic one. A child’s instrument to our family’s dismay.

The pinging and ponging of those strings drove us all to distraction as he perfected the tunes. Gathering us kids all together he skillfully encouraged us to sing as he plucked the songs on that instrument.

Singing. “Does your chewing gum loose its flavour. On the bedpost overnight. If your mother says don’t chew it, do you swallow it in spite. Can you catch it on your tonsils? Can you heave it left or right? Does your chewing

gum loose its flavour on the bedpost overnight?”

That iconic castle type building of the ‘De La Salle Brothers,’ still stands, in the small village of Castletown. It takes its name from an ancient castle that stood on the banks of the ‘River Nore,’ continues in full use. Advertised as ‘Holding School Retreats,’ ‘School Leadership Courses,’ plus training. It’s an ideal settting too for those to “come aside and rest awhile.” My big brother Pat does rest there. Deep in the cemetery. Resting in peace under the heading ‘Reverend Brother Patrick. Died Aged 47.’